

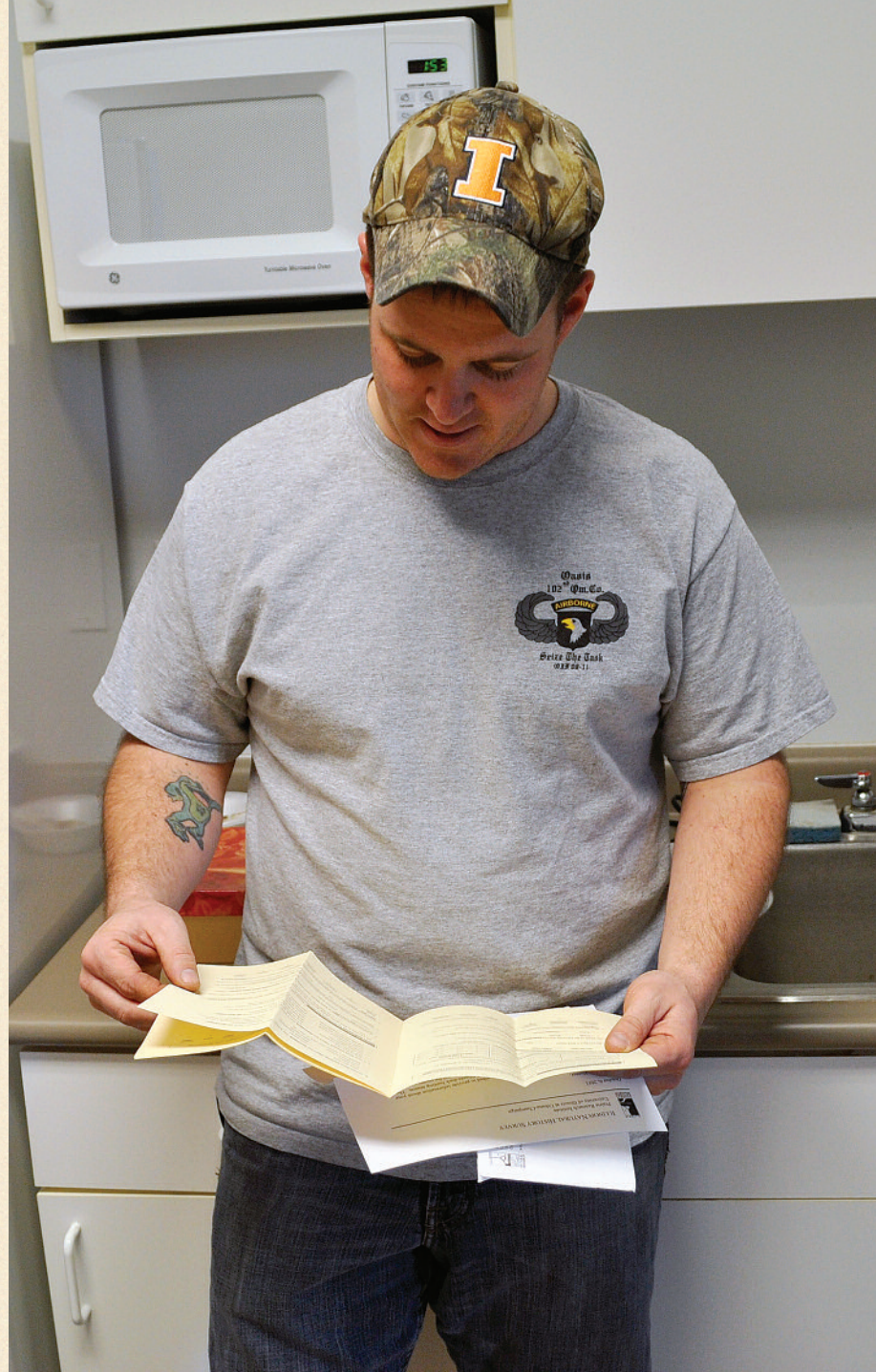
The Illinois Natural History Survey hunts for your experiences and opinions about nature and wildlife in Illinois.

# Tracking Public Opinion

Story By Craig Miller and Mark Alessi

**H**ave you ever wanted to express your opinion about wildlife-related issues to the Department of Natural Resources? You have the chance if you receive a survey questionnaire in the mail asking you about your hunting or trapping seasons, or your experiences with coyotes or your attitudes toward deer-culling programs.

The Human Dimensions Research Program at the Illinois Natural History Survey conducts several annual surveys for the Department of Natural Resources:



(Photo courtesy Illinois Natural History Survey.)

**A partnership program between the Department of Natural Resources and the Illinois Natural History Survey seeks input from residents on a variety of wildlife-related issues.**

Illinois Waterfowl Hunter Survey, Illinois Hunter Harvest Survey, Illinois Trapper Survey and Illinois Snow Goose Hunter Survey. In addition, other surveys are undertaken to gather public attitudes on a variety of topics, including homeowners' experiences with nuisance wildlife, agricultural crop damage and other wildlife-related issues. The Human Dimensions pro-

gram, one of the largest in the United States, is funded through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program, through the purchase of sporting arms and ammunition.

This program began in 1989 as a part of the DNR Division of Wildlife Resources and focused exclusively on hunters and their harvest. In 1998 the program was moved to the Illinois Natural History Survey. The focus was expanded in 1999 to include studies of homeown-

**Illinois Wildlife Action Plan**

[dnr.state.il.us](http://dnr.state.il.us)

Human Dimension Research Program surveys provide information for numerous campaigns.





(Photo courtesy Brian Tang, <http://hard-rain.wurled.com>.)

**This year, Illinois residents will be surveyed to determine their attitudes toward coyotes in the Greater Chicago Metropolitan Region.**

ers, agriculture producers and other relationships with wildlife.

Each fall, before the end of the hunting seasons, researchers from the Human Dimensions Research Program meet with DNR wildlife program managers to determine what issues are at the forefront of wildlife management and of concern to hunters in Illinois. From these meetings questionnaires are developed to collect data on harvest totals and hunter preferences for proposed management changes, and to evaluate current policies and procedures. In 2012, the program will conduct 10 separate surveys of more than 25,000 Illinois hunters, landowners and homeowners to help the DNR better understand how wildlife and wildlife management affect a variety of Illinois residents.

Recently, the Human Dimensions researchers have been working with DNR to evaluate hunter satisfaction with Illinois' fourth waterfowl zone, established for the 2011-12 waterfowl seasons. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service required in-depth studies of hunter participation as a part of their approval of additional zones or split seasons for each state, and Illinois was selected as one of two pilot states nationwide for these studies. As a part of this requirement, a pre-season survey was sent to Illinois duck hunters. In addition to hunter attitudes toward and potential use of the new zone, researchers were

also interested in gathering information on why some hunters seem to drift in and out of waterfowl hunting by purchasing state waterfowl stamps some years but not others.

The studies that the Human Dimensions Research Program conduct are scientific surveys that follow strict methods recognized by a body of scientists worldwide (see Sidebar). Each study begins with a random sample of a particular constituent group: hunters, homeowners, landowners or other Illinois citizens.

"How did you get my address?" is the question heard most often from people selected to be part of the survey. Names and addresses are drawn from existing databases for each interest group. Consider the Illinois Waterfowl Hunter Survey as an example. A random sample of survey participants is

necessary if results are to be generalized to the group as a whole. Of the approximately 51,000 waterfowl hunters in Illinois, 1,045 completed questionnaires are needed for a scientifically valid study, requiring the random selection of 5,000 names and addresses for the mailing. Where do these names and addresses come from? For the waterfowl hunter survey, names and addresses are selected from the list of Illinois waterfowl stamp purchasers. When it comes to the Illinois Hunter Harvest Survey, half (1,500) of the names and addresses are drawn from Illinois habitat stamp purchasers and

**Harvest information and hunter preferences help evaluate DNR policies and procedures.**

**E**xamples of recent and future issue-oriented surveys conducted by the INHS Human Dimensions Research Program and used by DNR for guiding program direction include:

- hunters' use of the Internet to purchase licenses and permits
- hunter preferences for season start and end dates for waterfowl seasons
- impact of white-tailed deer populations on agriculture producers in the state
- hunter recruitment and retention for waterfowl and upland hunting through a youth hunter survey
- a dove hunter survey
- a survey of landowners regarding feral (wild) hogs in Illinois
- attitudes toward coyotes and deer-culling programs in the Greater Chicago Metropolitan Region

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)







**Illinois is one of two states conducting a pilot waterfowl hunter study required by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.**

the other half from Illinois hunting license purchasers. To get a proper sample for studies of homeowners, names and addresses are randomly selected from public databases, such as property tax rolls.

Another question involves the anonymity of those who return a completed questionnaire. To manage Illinois' natural resources, DNR is not interested in individuals' harvests, but rather the statewide harvest. To ensure anonymity, each questionnaire is assigned a numeric code linking the names and addresses in the mailing list, and the respondent's name and address is deleted from the database once the questionnaire is returned. No identification exists to link the returned questionnaire and the identity of the person who returned it. If a survey questionnaire is not returned, a reminder postcard is mailed within two weeks—and second and third reminders at two-week intervals, as necessary. Why so many mailings? In order to have enough responses to allow researchers to compare the results to the group as a

whole, a certain number of completed survey questions are needed. If you've heard news casts that quote Gallup or other national surveys, you might hear that the results are accurate "plus or minus 3 percent." The more responses received, the more accurate the results, meaning that "plus or minus" number gets smaller. If DNR is considering changes to a waterfowl zone boundary, adding a new season or expanding deer-culling programs, it is essential to get as accurate a response as possible in order to have the confidence that the results mirror the opinions of the people potentially affected by the policy or regulatory change.

Through the Human Dimensions Research Program of the Illinois Natural History Survey, DNR annually reaches out to more than 5 percent of all hunters, and more from specific groups

**Questionnaires are assigned a numeric code, ensuring the anonymity of each person returning a survey.**

(almost 8 percent of waterfowl hunters). By comparison, more hunters in Illinois have the opportunity to provide input on an annual basis than hunters in our neighboring states. This input is not restricted to hunters or trappers. Each year more than 10,000 Illinois homeowners and landowners are provided the opportunity to express their attitudes toward wildlife management in our state.

If you are selected to take part in this expansive and important effort, please take a few minutes and complete the survey questionnaire. Both you and the wildlife in Illinois will benefit from your input.



Craig Miller, Ph.D. (craigm@illinois.edu) is the program leader and Mark Alessi (males2@illinois.edu) is the research coordinator with the Human Dimensions Research Program, Illinois Natural History Survey. They can be reached at (217) 244-5121.

## Why a mail survey?

Most of the data are gathered through mail surveys, a preferred method that provides more data than the Internet and is less burdensome on participants. Not everyone has Internet access at home, and for this reason Internet surveys do not reach everyone.

Compared with telephone surveys, mail surveys can be filled out when it's convenient to the survey participant, not at the time the survey researcher calls. Plus, with caller ID and the prevalence of cell phones it is difficult to reach some people and such differences may influence the results of the study.

Mail surveys also allow for more detailed questions, and this is important when DNR managers need public input on a difficult issue.



**T**o learn more about the INHS Human Dimensions Research Program and read study reports, go to [www.inhs.illinois.edu/programs/hd](http://www.inhs.illinois.edu/programs/hd).